

Moving beyond the ‘crisis’: Recommendations for the European Commission’s communication on migration

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List of abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CMR	Central Mediterranean route
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EBCG	European Border and Coast Guard, also known as Frontex
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs
GNA	Libyan Government of National Accord
LCG	Libyan Coast Guard
SAR	Search and Rescue

Executive summary

The year 2015 marked the arrival of an unprecedented number of migrants and refugees in the EU. Soon politicians, policymakers and the press dubbed these events a ‘migration crisis’. With the steep increase in public attention putting migration at the very top of the political agenda, right-wing populist parties saw their chance to capitalise on voters’ concerns in a vast majority of EU member states.

It also led to migration becoming an even more ‘emotional’ topic that is not easily communicated yet strongly resonates with audiences across the continent. The European Commission, as the institution responsible for proposing policies to tackle the ‘crisis’ and for communicating them to the public, is of special significance in this context. Its role in contributing to and reinforcing the ‘migration crisis’ narrative through its communications should therefore be subject to scrutiny. It is clear that the Commission has strategically applied the crisis narrative over the course of the past five years, as it developed from a rather unstructured use of several words and phrases, to a coherent story about the ‘crisis’ as a stand-alone and historically unprecedented phenomenon. In response to the ‘crisis’, the Commission’s approach gradually morphed from a humanitarian framing (2015–16) into one focused on border management (circa 2017) and cooperation with third countries to manage migration (2018 onwards). In 2019 the Commission declared the ‘crisis’ to be over.

The Commission communicated about the so-called crisis, including its supposed end, on the basis of two factors: (i) numbers and (ii) the uncontrolled nature of arrivals. However, this Discussion Paper argues that, overall, the Commission’s use of the crisis narrative has not been accurate, neither as a description of past phenomena nor as way to address citizens’ concerns. Rather, it served the purpose of framing migration as a security issue and legitimised restrictive policy measures meant to ‘tackle the crisis’. These included, for instance, ramped up border controls or increased cooperation with third countries to curb migration.

More specifically, the Commission’s continued reliance on and application of this narrative is flawed for three reasons:

- first, it does not take into account the far larger numbers of refugees hosted in third countries and other ongoing humanitarian crises, which in comparison, did not receive the same amount of attention;
- second, conceptualising the ‘crisis’ in terms of numbers misses the mark in addressing citizens’ main concerns about migration;
- third, this narrative ignores the fact that a significant part of the ‘crisis’ is related to the mismanaged policy responses, rather than the number or nature of arrivals.

More problematic, however, is that this narrative has contributed to an environment wherein right-wing populists are given ample room to spread their message. They have been able to legitimise control-oriented measures as a way to tackle the ‘crisis’. Mainstream politicians have also increasingly adopted a security-oriented discourse on migration, in the hope of appealing to voters in favour of more restrictive measures.

This Paper puts forward a number of recommendations to counter these dynamics and create a more forward-looking narrative on migration. It argues that the Commission should abandon the crisis narrative and develop a more proactive and diversified communication strategy instead, which would include the following elements:

- **Issue salience:** The Commission should be aware of the impact of frequently communicating about migration on public opinion, political decision-making and the rising influence of anti-immigration forces. This awareness, however, should not stop the Commission from communicating all together. Clearly, *not* communicating about migration is not a viable option and could actually play into the hands of right-wing populist forces that have no qualms about using the subject as a tool to stir fear and distrust. Rather than the frequency, it is the tone and content of communication on migration that should be adjusted.
- **More diverse frames:** It is important to abandon narratives that present refugees and migrants, and in particular their numbers, as an issue that needs to be addressed in the framework of crisis management. This discourse can easily be co-opted by right-wing populist actors and used to blame the EU for not doing enough. To adequately pre-empt these dynamics, the Commission should diversify the frames it uses when communicating about migration. Instead of employing a security frame by default, a greater range of frames that draw on economic or humanitarian aspects and are adaptable to different contexts and situations would lead to a more balanced discussion on migration.
- **Storytelling:** Communication about migration should find a healthier balance between data and stories. Personal testimonies and storytelling are very effective in raising an audience’s empathy levels and giving a face to complex processes. Conversely, numbers and statistics are more difficult to convey to an audience and can complicate direct communication as they almost always require further explanation. However, evidence and facts should remain the foundation of all EU communications on migration.
- **Targeting of audience groups:** The Commission should gain a better understanding of the diverse audiences in EU member states and shape its communications to better target them. In this respect,

it is helpful to take note of research that has studied audiences at the national level and to differentiate between society groups that are specific to EU member states. With respect to audience segmentation, it is important to focus more on the so-called movable middle, which seems to be more open to positive messages about migration than previously assumed. At the same time, other audience segments must not be ignored. It is important for the content of the Commission's messages to be consistent and coherent throughout. However, the delivery could still be tailored by taking into account the values of the targeted audience group.

- ▶ **More relatable and digestible messages:** The Commission should put a greater focus on making the style and tone of its communications more relatable,

for instance by clarifying the impact of its policies on individuals' lives. In addition, messages on migration should be presented in a more digestible manner. This could be done, for instance, by empowering Commission staff to become 'ambassadors' who communicate directly to their national audiences, both online and offline. Moreover, translating all communications into the EU's official 24 languages is key in building a better rapport with citizens.

- ▶ **Migration issues correctly contextualised:** Often, migration issues are wrongly linked to particular problems that would find a more accurate answer in other policy areas, such as labour market reforms. The Commission should take this into account to avoid migration being used as a scapegoat for other issues.

Introduction

2015 marked the arrival of an unprecedented number of migrants and refugees coming to the EU. The public attention towards these events placed migration at the very top of the political agenda. It also led to **migration becoming an even more emotionalised topic** that is not easily communicated, yet resonates with audiences strongly. As migration and asylum policies have increasingly moved to the European level in the last decades, the stakes are raised for European institutions to communicate their policies and feed them back to European citizens.

In parallel to an increased focus on border and migration control measures in EU policy circles, the European Commission centred its **communications around the narrative of a migration ‘crisis’**. Gradually, and over the years that followed, this narrative evolved from focusing on relocation and saving lives in the Mediterranean (2015-16) to one on controlling the EU’s borders (circa 2017), to increased cooperation with third countries to manage migration (2018 onwards).

Generally, this narrative served the purpose of framing migration as a security issue and **legitimised extraordinary measures aiming to tackle the ‘crisis’**. However, and especially with the rise of populism across European countries, it has become clear that communication on migration does not gain anything from pushing the crisis narrative. Rather, it opens up a space in which right-wing populist ideas are normalised and amplified. This also creates a basis for legitimising more restrictive and control-oriented migration policies.

It has become clear that communication on migration does not gain anything from pushing the crisis narrative.

In 2019, the Commission declared Europe to be “no longer in crisis mode”.¹ This statement raises the question of what will come next and how the new von der Leyen Commission will pick up this thread.

The Commission’s communication output has particular importance. Given that the Commission has the ‘right of initiative’, **its communication must convey the overall direction of policy proposals developed**; and the message the Commission conveys has a potentially significant impact. For this reason, this Discussion Paper mainly focuses on the Commission’s framing of the migration crisis narrative.² At the same time, it is

important to acknowledge that other actors such as **the EU Council and member states also applied narratives on migration and therefore actively contributed to an interpretation and understanding of the ‘crisis’** in this context.

This Paper rests on a review of selected Commission communications. Altogether, 14 central texts, issued between 2015 and 2019, were examined to analyse and showcase the chronological development of the Commission’s crisis narrative.³ This selection does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to deconstruct **the discursive development of the migration crisis narrative** by focusing on regular communicative updates.⁴

In addition, the analysis of this Paper also took account of speeches and public comments made by prominent Commission representatives, such as former President Jean-Claude Juncker and former Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs Dimitris Avramopoulos, and of semi-structured interviews conducted with communication actors during the summer of 2019. Interviewees mainly stemmed from an EU institutional background. Also, several interviews were also conducted with communication actors from NGOs to help sketch a wider understanding of the Commission’s strategic communications.

This Paper also profited from a series of roundtable discussions held in Brussels during 2019. The discussions included communication officials from EU institutions, communication actors from civil society organisations and think tanks, as well as academic experts.

Finally, the analysis reflects expert literature on ‘frames’ and ‘narratives’. Frames are defined as communicative constructs that convey a specific interpretation by selectively presenting information.⁵ They help to build narratives which often serve to establish a commonly shared perception of a problem and therefore also increase support for a chosen approach to tackle the problem.⁶ Both frames and narratives are highly complex discursive instruments that, when applied effectively, have a considerable impact on political communication.

In what follows, the Paper’s first section begins by charting the prevailing migration crisis narrative at the EU level. A second section explains why the continued reliance on and application of this narrative is inaccurate. The third and final section presents new potential strategies for the Commission’s communications on migration. It recommends a more proactive and diversified approach to communicating about migration that moves away from the crisis narrative. Practical examples support the recommendations.

1. Migration and the ‘crisis’: The European Commission’s strategic communication

The Commission’s framing of migration has generally taken place within the wider narrative of the migration ‘crisis’, even if it has evolved over several years. The arrival of migrants during the **summer of 2015** was first communicated through a **humanitarian frame**, which set the context for a predominant narrative of refugees that came to Europe to seek protection.

However, **the focus soon turned to a frame of uncontrolled borders and migration as a security problem** that needed to be tackled by an externalisation of border management. According to individuals interviewed for this project, a general shift in the climate of migration policies and, hence, communications took place: from an emphasis on relocation and saving lives in the Mediterranean (2015-16), to controlling the EU’s borders (circa 2017), to increased cooperation with third countries to manage migration (2018 onwards).⁷ Approaching the management of migration from different angles ultimately takes place within the wider narrative of the migration crisis. The following section details the developments and consequences of this communicative strategy.

1.1 SPRING 2015: THE ONSET OF THE CRISIS NARRATIVE

Following a number of shipwrecks in the first half of 2015, and in particular an incident close to Lampedusa in April 2015 that saw the loss of almost 300 lives, the Commission presented its European Agenda on Migration in May 2015. The Agenda was conceived of as a seminal footprint addressing the immediate challenges in the Mediterranean and as a roadmap to charter medium- and long-term steps in developing the EU’s common asylum and migration policy more generally. In the document, the Commission already speaks of a ‘crisis’ without yet telling the story of the migration ‘crisis’. Instead, the document, through which the Commission codified its migration and asylum policies for the years to come, presents the situation as one that could be followed by other crises:

“Every crisis will be different, but the EU needs to heed the lesson and be prepared to act in anticipation of a crisis, not just in reaction.”⁸

As such, the exact wording used in the document is rather general: “a crisis” and “a specific crisis” are used interchangeably. Tellingly, the text in the beginning also highlights an awareness on the part of the Commission:

“[m]isguided and stereotyped narratives often tend to focus only on certain types of flows, overlooking the inherent complexity of this phenomenon, which impacts society in many different ways and calls for a variety of responses.”⁹

Moreover, other documents of **the Commission’s first implementation package of May 2015** (e.g. the communication on resettlement, the EU action plan against migrant smuggling) do not make any crisis references at all. This shows that there was no strategic approach yet to constructing the story of the migration ‘crisis’. As discussed during interviews, EU communication officials saw the need to communicate on migration through a more pedagogical and ad hoc approach, as large parts of the audience were relatively uninformed about migration issues at that time.¹⁰

The Commission’s communication on migration in spring 2015 shows that there was no strategic approach yet to constructing the story of the migration ‘crisis’.

1.2 SUMMER 2015: THE MANIFESTATION OF THE ‘CRISIS’

This changed significantly, however, after the **summer of 2015**, which saw new records in migration arrival numbers on an almost daily basis.¹¹ In September of the same year, the Commission released Addressing the Refugee Crisis in Europe: The Role of EU External Action, a Joint Communication with the European Parliament.¹² It is striking that the title **capitalises “crisis”, therefore giving it a stand-alone significance** and bringing it to life as an event in and of itself. Research on discourses has found that neutral terms can initially turn into metaphors for larger developments over time. This then opens up the possibility of redefining certain terms in different contexts.¹³ The beginning of the Commission text is an example of such a development, with the first sentence reading:

“The European Union (EU) is facing the largest refugee crisis since the end of World War II. The current situation has to be seen in a broader context of violent conflict and destabilisation in other parts of the world. It is a crisis of unprecedented magnitude that largely originates from conflicts and persecutions in Europe’s wider neighbourhood.”¹⁴

This historical contextualisation is significant as it allows the reader to understand the current events in reference to the highly emotional frame of the Second World War. This induces the audience to understand the scale of the

‘crisis’ by comparing it to what arguably has been the biggest moment of disaster in the continent’s modern history. Moreover, it relates the ‘crisis’ to developments in neighbouring countries, therefore giving it a bigger geographical contextualisation. The narrative itself, however, is rather simplistic, especially as it does not clarify which European refugee movements it is referring to and disregards the dissimilar context of the Second World War.

In addition, it is important to note that the Commission’s communication output during this time focused on ‘refugees’ rather than ‘economic migrants’, a term that emerged in later Communications (see section 1.4). The former term was also used by former Commission President Juncker in public statements at the time:

“In spite of our fragility, our self-perceived weaknesses, today it is Europe that is sought as a place of refuge and exile. This is something to be proud of, though it is not without its challenges. The first priority today is and must be addressing the refugee crisis.”¹⁵

This conceptualisation of events as the “refugee crisis” is significant as it also corresponds with the humanitarian focus of policy responses during this time. As evident in the above quote, this communicational concept is linked to a self-definition of Europe as a place of protection for those seeking refuge. As such, this is a stark difference to the perceived need of managing migration that was communicated thereafter, and as analysed in the following sections.

1.3 LATE SEPTEMBER 2015: MANAGING THE ‘CRISIS’

From late September 2015 onwards, the Commission started to publish regular, almost monthly, updates on “managing the refugee crisis”. In parallel, the general terminology used to describe the phenomenon became much more consistent. This can be seen to reflect **a strategic decision to solidify the ‘crisis’, both linguistically as well as in policy terms**. It is also worth noting that in these communications, the Commission presented itself in the active role of the ‘manager’ of the ‘crisis’, thereby trying to gain legitimacy for advancing a European approach to migration and asylum policies as opposed to national ones in a politically tense time. This also entailed a strong EU involvement in the operationalisation of the ‘hotspots’ in Italy and Greece, particularly through the set-up of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG). In presenting itself as the ‘manager of the crisis’, the Commission makes use of several instruments: focusing on personal stories, calling on member states to act and admonishing them for lack of implementation of policies. In what follows, these three instruments are considered in turn.

To begin with, the Commission includes personal stories in these communications to convey the

progress of policies. This is the case, for instance, in an October 2015 communication on the first relocation exercise. A textbox details “taking 19 Eritreans to start a new life in Sweden” from Italy as an “important symbolic moment”.¹⁶ Aside from covering some of the more operational aspects, the communication also describes how asylum seekers’ initial reluctance to trust the system was overcome following the efforts of Commission envoys and NGOs, leading to “queues of people wanting to register”.¹⁷

It is clear that the Commission attempted to give relocated migrants a more human face with these communicative choices. However, it is doubtful whether this was actually successful, given that this communication also relies quite heavily on institutional and operational facts. Generally, this example shows that **the communicative style and narrative of the ‘crisis’ does not easily lend itself to conveying more personal stories of migrants**. Rather, it creates a context in which emergency instruments to manage the ‘crisis’ on a larger scale are easier to communicate than stories of individuals affected by those policy measures on the ground.

The general terminology used to describe the phenomenon became much more consistent. This can be seen to reflect a strategic decision to solidify the ‘crisis’, both linguistically as well as in policy terms.

Gradually, the Commission’s focus shifted away from such emotional stories to rely ever more frequently on communicating about the ‘crisis’ from a more global point of view instead. In early 2016, a communication on the state of play of actions under the European Agenda on Migration advised the following:

“While a reduction in flows is highly desirable in view of often overwhelmed national and local authorities, there should be no illusions that the refugee crisis will end before its root causes [...] are addressed in a definite manner. The only responsible course of action is to face this reality and to explain it openly and honestly to citizens [...]”¹⁸

Several things are conveyed through this line of communication. For one, it acknowledges the concerns of member states that face increasing pressure from their local and national administrations when processing arrivals. However, it also excludes the likelihood of a swift conclusion to this ‘emergency’, invoking a sense of responsibility and duty on the part of the Council and the Parliament – the addressees of this text – in communicating this to EU citizens. Afterwards, the focus on these continuing “flows” gives way to a critical

assessment of the member states' implementation of policy measures to tackle the 'crisis':

*"While important building blocks of a sustainable system of migration management are now in place on paper, it is their swift, full implementation on the ground that has been lacking. [...] implementation was too slow. [...] several deadlines have not been met and many commitments are still slow to be fulfilled. Political responsibilities need to be assumed at highest level in all Member States [...]."*¹⁹

Gradually, the Commission's focus shifted away from emotional stories to rely ever more frequently on communicating about the 'crisis' from a more global point of view instead.

This shows that it is important to consider not only when the Commission defines a situation as a 'crisis', but also when it does not. **The crisis narrative is thus more easily upheld by relatively vague descriptions of 'flows' of refugees or migrants.** The failure of management on the part of the member states described in the paragraph above are serious enough for the Commission to call for "[r]estoring orderly management of borders" as "the most pressing priority for the European Union today."²⁰ However, this is not discussed within the narrative of a crisis. This Discussion Paper returns to this schism of what is and is not a 'crisis' in the third part.

1.4 SUMMER 2016 TO 2017: A FOCUS ON NUMBERS

During the summer of 2016, the Commission released a communication on the Partnership Framework with third countries. This was part of **a significant step towards cooperating with outside partners to manage migration.** At the very beginning of the text, the Commission states:

*"Despite increased efforts by the EU, deaths in the Mediterranean Sea occur on a daily basis. Europe is currently experiencing unprecedented migratory flows, driven by geopolitical and economic factors that will continue, and maybe intensify, over the coming years and indeed it is a global challenge with more than 60 million displaced persons worldwide."*²¹

The entire text is linked to geopolitical considerations of earlier communications. It also focuses strongly on numbers,²² which are presented as set to continue if not increase. The allusion to an ever-growing rise in the number is underlined by referring to the global number of displaced persons. In the following lines of the text, the

Commission presents Europe as "duty bound to respond". This image of strong pressure re-emerges several lines later: "Reports suggest that there are tens of thousands of migrants in Libya today, looking for ways to enter the EU".²³ This, again, sets the scene for the Commission to introduce the Partnership Framework as a meaningful way to engage with third countries, to respond to the 'crisis'.

The crisis narrative also creates a discursive environment in which **control-oriented cooperation with third countries is legitimised as necessary to tackle the 'crisis'**.²⁴ One high-profile example of this policy strategy is the EU-Turkey statement agreed in March of that same year, which intends to decrease border crossings from Turkey to the EU.²⁵ The crisis narrative also sets the stage for deeper control-oriented cooperation between EU member states and North African states.

This focus on numbers remains central to Commission communications from then onwards. Further examples include a Joint Communication from January 2017, which discusses numbers of arrivals and the makeup of the migration flows arriving via the Central Mediterranean route (CMR) in 2016. Looking towards the future, this communication highlights a quote by Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat:

*"Come next Spring Europe will face a heavy influx of migrants through the Central Mediterranean. [...] I see no way in which one single Member State can manage or absorb this further wave. Thus, the essence of the core principles of the European Union will be seriously tested unless we act now."*²⁵

The focus on numbers remains central to Commission communications from 2016 onwards.

The quote and its inclusion in this EU document are interesting for two reasons. First, it is a prime example of **reliance on water metaphors in international and EU discourses**, such as 'influx' and 'wave' in this case, but also 'flows', 'trickle' or 'stream' on other occasions. This has the effect of displaying migration movements as a force of nature that is difficult to contain and can only be faced in unison. As shown by research, these kinds of metaphors serve to produce and reproduce a context in which discourses can be constructed in a certain way; in this case to convey a sense of emergency and an urgent need for action.²⁷ As detailed by Ferreira, "expressions connected to natural disasters serve as a securitarian element in the politicians' speech, as they imply that those migrants pose a threat to internal security."²⁸

Second, the quote transfers a sense of critical urgency by alerting the audience to what seems to be a looming catastrophe of great dimension. Based on this assumption, the communication then details the importance of

controlling migration movements further upstream, particularly by supporting the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) and Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). In communicating the training of and support for the LCG, EU discourse heavily relied on the euphemism of *controlling* Libyan borders at sea, which is connected to the aim of reducing, as much as possible, the number of arrivals to European shores.

The Commission changed its focus from narrating the ‘crisis’ in the context of ‘refugees fleeing from danger’ to “primarily economic migrants” trying to reach the EU.

This ‘crisis’ mode sentiment is repeated in the July 2017 Action Plan on the CMR. The document is striking in its managerial approach to the situation, based on the following argument:

“The loss of life and continuing migratory flows of primarily economic migrants on the Central Mediterranean route is a structural challenge and remains an issue of urgent and serious concern not only for Europe but also for the African continent as a whole.”²⁹

This wording makes it clear that the Commission changed its focus from narrating the ‘crisis’ in the context of ‘refugees fleeing from danger’ to “primarily economic migrants” trying to reach the EU. Moreover, it presents this as a concern for the whole of Africa, regardless of the different African countries’ relevance in the context. This goes to show that the Commission pushed for even greater involvement of third countries in migration management activities and calls on member states for more concerted efforts “[t]owards a sustainable crisis management”.³⁰ While it does not provide much in terms of specific measures, this is the first public indication, in mid-2017, that EU actors are looking for **more systematic sustainability instead of an ad hoc approach**.

1.5 AUTUMN 2017: OVERCOMING THE ‘CRISIS’

In September 2017, the Commission published its midterm review of the European Agenda on Migration. In keeping with a reference made two years earlier, the Commission states at the beginning of the text that:

“In the last two years, Europe experienced the largest number of arrivals of refugees and migrants since the end of the Second World War. [...] Migration, asylum and border management systems were put under huge pressure. The Union and its Member States were not sufficiently prepared to respond effectively. The scale of the crisis had a powerful impact across the EU.”³¹

The Commission then continues to detail how the ‘crisis’ unfolded and the measures that were taken. Unlike previous communications, however, the tone and approach of the midterm review are different in that it is reflective and presents results of different policy initiatives. According to the Commission, these initiatives were largely successful in reducing the number of arrivals, managing the external borders more effectively and creating a coordinated European response. As such, this communication departs from the heightened sense of alarm present in previous communications, stating instead that the moment has come to “focus efforts on putting in place the remaining building blocks of better migration management.”³² The reduced numbers of sea arrivals are important to consider in this respect. While 2015 saw more than one million arrivals, the number of migrants arriving by the end of 2017 had shrunk to 185,000.³³ This was also reflected in comments made by former First Vice-President Frans Timmermans in September 2017:

“Our joint efforts to respond to the migration and refugee crisis have led to tangible results, with irregular arrivals significantly down in both the Eastern and the Central Mediterranean.”³⁴

Given the Commission’s conceptualisation of the ‘crisis’ in terms of numbers, it is evident that this reduction was communicated as a success. The apparent decrease in arrival numbers is emphasised again in a communication from December 2017, in which the Commission charts “a way forward” and states that:

“The time has come to find the solutions to move from an ‘ad hoc’ approach based on crisis management, towards a stable future-proof asylum framework, part of a fully integrated EU migration policy.”³⁵

Given the Commission’s conceptualisation of the ‘crisis’ in terms of numbers, it is evident that the reduction in arrivals was communicated as a success.

This document is also significant in as far as it clearly conveys **the growing importance of the external dimension of EU migration policies**, which is presented as indispensable to what the Commission calls a “comprehensive approach”. Interviews conducted for this Discussion Paper also confirmed that various EU institutions consciously introduced the topic of migration into foreign policy discussions and bilateral relations with, for instance, African counterparts.³⁶

Within the overall story of the ‘crisis’, this same communication refers again to measures (e.g. the EU-Turkey statement) alleviating “migratory pressure” on member states at the external border, and to the operationalisation of the EBCG to “stabilise irregular

flows". In this way, the explicit aim to move away from "crisis management" is complemented by a **shift in language; away from "emergency" and ad hoc measures to "stabilising" and "long term" instruments.**³⁷ This outlook returns as the mainline in Commission communications throughout 2018, which conjure "vigilance and preparedness" to anticipate future migratory "crises" in a "fragile" situation. In order to do so, the Commission calls on EU institutions and member states to commit to regular coordination of migration management efforts.³⁸

1.6 LATE 2018: THE 'CRISIS' IS OVER?

At the end of 2018, an important milestone was communicated by the Commission: arrival numbers were at a lower level than before the 'crisis'.³⁹ The message that arrivals dropped to "pre-crisis levels" also took centre-stage in a March 2019 communication which credits the reduction to deeper cooperation with key partner countries.⁴⁰ This is in line with the Commission's conceptualisation of the 'crisis' in terms of numbers of arrivals via the EU's external borders and their communication on policy priorities. While the European Agenda on Migration communications of 2015 placed great emphasis on the importance of saving lives at sea, the communications that followed thereafter gave **an increasingly central role to border management.** Finally, in a speech held by former Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos in March 2019, on the progress made under the European Agenda on Migration, the priorities stated were partnerships with third countries, strengthening the external borders, and putting in place the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).⁴¹

Communications must correspond to the policy priorities they cover, which have increasingly focused on the externalisation of border management.

Naturally, communications must correspond to the policy priorities they cover, which – as studies have shown – have increasingly focused on the externalisation of border management.⁴² Yet, what is interesting when studying the strategic communication decisions of the Commission is that this **externalisation is framed as a necessary step towards preventing further migratory 'crises'**. As such, it is a significant departure from tackling the 'crisis' by saving lives in the Mediterranean (2015-16) and also, to a lesser extent, strengthening the EU's border management (2017).

The reduced numbers of arrivals resulting from such policy responses created the context in which the Commission could finally declare the migration 'crisis' to be over. Nearing the end of the Juncker Commission's

mandate, a factsheet was published in March 2019 entitled Debunking myths about migration. This document unequivocally stated,

*"Myth: Europe is experiencing a migration crisis.
Fact: Europe is no longer in crisis mode".⁴³*

Over the last five years, the Commission strategically applied the narrative of the migration crisis.

Still, **the Commission solely frames the 'crisis' in numerical terms** with this statement, **therefore keeping with its inherently problematic conceptualisation** (see section 2).

The 'end of the crisis' also featured in several press conferences and speeches by Commissioner Avramopoulos.⁴⁴ In May 2019, as a written contribution to the EU leaders' informal meeting in Sibiu, the Commission published its thinking on effective communication in times of increasing fragmentation and disinformation:

"[...] further accountability and clarity in decision-making is essential to ensure more joint ownership of the outcome of political processes. This would also help to avoid a persistent 'crisis myth' and the tendency to focus communication primarily on points of disagreement."⁴⁵

The paragraph also includes a more general reference to disagreements between member states in the Council. Nevertheless, it shows an awareness within the Commission that **a continuation of the crisis narrative in its strategic communication is undesirable.** Several paragraphs later, the Commission reiterates that "[e]ven if the term 'migration crisis in Europe' still prominently features in public and political discourse, the reality is that arrivals to the EU have been brought back to pre-crisis levels."⁴⁶

To summarise, it is clear that over the last five years, the Commission applied the narrative of the migration crisis strategically, developing it from a rather unstructured usage of several wordings to an establishment of the 'crisis' as a stand-alone and historically unprecedented phenomenon. In response to this 'crisis', the Commission's approach also gradually developed from a humanitarian framing to one focused on border management and cooperation with third countries in order to tackle security concerns. In 2019, the Commission decided to no longer communicate about an active 'crisis' – instead, it declared it to be over. The following section analyses the impact of the Commission's communications up until now. On that basis, recommendations for the next possible steps in communicating about migration are provided.

2. A problematic narrative

Today, no one would disagree that the numbers of arrivals to the EU since, and particularly during, 2015-16 were unprecedented. The Juncker Commission did not employ a codified communication strategy for its migration policies.⁴⁷ However, the continuous repetition of the crisis narrative over the years shows that the Commission intended to tell a specific story of the nature of the 'crisis', and in turn, the EU's response.

The 'crisis' provided the backbone for the development of increasingly restrictive migration policies.

For the past four years, this communicative interpretation of the 'crisis', namely the focus on the numbers of migrants arriving in the EU, provided the backbone for the development of increasingly restrictive migration policies. Against this background, the continuous references to the crisis narrative – or, as is the most recent case, having 'overcome the crisis' – reinforce the legitimacy of previous communications. As shown by research, this stems from the continuous triggering of the audience's cognitive perception of migration as related to a 'crisis'.⁴⁸ The repetition of such wording primarily continues to refer to the 'uncontrolled numbers of arrivals' and, as such, frames migration as an issue of security. This complicates the conceptualisation and discussion surrounding migration in other contexts and is also significant to the rise of populism, as analysed in the third section of this paper.

At this point, it should be reiterated that, of course, the Commission was not the only voice in this debate. Rather, other actors such as the Council and member states themselves also applied this narrative and hence actively contributed to this interpretation of the 'crisis'. In several cases, these communications took on an even more restrictive tone.⁴⁹ As such, they, as much as the Commission, contributed to the public discourse and fostered an understanding of the migration 'crisis'.

Now, with some years of hindsight, the crisis narrative and its stand-alone importance in the Commission's communications on migration can be closely scrutinised. Two questions can be raised in this respect: was this an appropriate communicative choice for this context? And what were the results of this crisis narrative?

2.1 WAS THE CRISIS NARRATIVE APPROPRIATE?

Four years on, it has become clear that the crisis narrative was inappropriate. In stating this, it is important to keep

in mind that the Commission communicated the 'crisis' based on two factors: (i) sheer numbers and (ii) the uncontrolled nature of arrivals. Several arguments can be made against communicating the 'crisis' according to these benchmarks.

- First and foremost, with respect to numbers, **there are examples of other highly challenging situations outside of Europe that are comparable to the European migration 'crisis', and yet have not received the same stand-alone notoriety.** For instance, the European situation has been compared to countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In the context of the Syrian War, these three neighbouring states have taken in a combined estimate of more than 5.2 million people.⁵⁰ In comparison, the EU28 had taken in a combined estimate of a little less than 950,000 Syrians by 2018.⁵¹ This comparison is striking not only in terms of pure numbers, but is also impressive when considering the unequal financial and infrastructural resources for hosting refugees between these regions.

Communicating the 'crisis' based on numbers and the nature of irregular arrivals holds no intrinsic legitimacy.

Other comparisons with different forms of migration can be made. For instance, commentators have pointed out that irregular migration may also occur when migrants overstay their visas after entering the EU regularly and are very difficult to control or keep track of. The number of overstayers are thought to be considerable,⁵² and yet this phenomenon has not been communicated as a 'crisis'.

These two examples serve to show that communicating the 'crisis' based on numbers and the nature of irregular arrivals holds no intrinsic legitimacy. They also support the observation that the Commission seemingly deprioritises other equally serious situations.

- Second, **the crisis narrative also misses the mark when it comes to public perceptions.** Research on debates on migration in European countries has shown that "governments [focus] on numbers while publics are concerned about community impact and interaction."⁵³ This can then lead to citizens perceiving the political dialogue as irrelevant or inaccurate. Therefore, communicating about the 'crisis' in terms of numbers does not necessarily align with citizens' main concerns regarding the impact of migration on the economy and security.

► Third, the point is not that ‘migration’ cannot be linked to ‘crisis’. Rather, **communication actors should be aware of the gravity of the latter and apply it suitably**. In this context, several commentators have proposed that talking about a ‘migration management crisis’ would have been more appropriate in the context of the 2015-16 developments and their aftermath.⁵⁴ This would have entailed a greater focus on (failed) policies rather than the numbers of arrivals. At the time, and as analysed in this Paper’s first section, the Commission did indeed admonish member states for their slow and incomplete implementation of migration management instruments. With hindsight, the Commission has also admitted that the EU and its member states were unprepared to respond adequately to the increased numbers of arrivals. Nevertheless, none of these communications used the ‘crisis’ label, unlike those referring to the scale of migrants’ arrivals.

Overall, the Commission’s use of the crisis narrative has not been accurate, neither in its description of past phenomena nor in addressing citizens’ concerns.

2.2 WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THE “CRISIS” NARRATIVE?

The crisis narrative had a highly problematic impact on the politics surrounding EU migration policies, including both political discourses and policy measures. Six impacts are particularly significant, as will be explained below.

First, the crisis narrative has **contributed to a context in which mainstream political actors have been enticed to shift their communications on migration to the right**. As calls from right-wing populists for more restrictive policy measures to tackle the ‘crisis’ have grown louder, mainstream political actors have felt the need to change their discourses in the hope of hanging on to once-loyal voters.⁵⁵ At the same time, such right-wing discourses reinforce the crisis narrative further, setting circular dynamics into motion. This is a slippery downward slope in that right-wing populist communications have gradually become more mainstream as both conservative, and socialist and liberal parties have taken over populist discourse and policy proposals, too.

Right-wing populists seek to maintain the perception of migration as dangerous, which can only be met by the nationalisation of immigration regimes.

Second, the Danish Socialist Democratic Party has for instance increasingly aligned itself with political positions usually associated with conservative parties. Most recently, commentators have observed that in response to the success of far-right parties, the Danish Social Democrats

have gradually taken on an extreme anti-immigration stance.⁵⁶ Party leader Mette Frederiksen has spoken of the need to eliminate immigrant “ghettos”, a term also employed by the right-wing populist Prime Minister of Hungary, Victor Orbán.⁵⁷

However, discursive strategies that replicate populist communication strategies are not as straightforward as they may seem and do not necessarily bring the expected effect. Populist parties advance seemingly “authentic” messages through direct, unconstrained and polarising communication.⁵⁸ Mainstream political actors have difficulties reproducing these dynamics, which makes winning over supporters more difficult than it may initially seem.⁵⁹ In addition, and in doing so, they also **make it easy for right-wing populists to perpetuate their preferred communication strategies and reinforce fears about ‘masses of immigrants’**. In this context, it is helpful to keep in mind that as Graef has stated,

“narratives, stories, and frames have one important thing in common: they are all rooted in a certain degree of selectivity based on the values, norms, and identity of an individual or group. [...] They are never neutral.”⁶⁰

In this vein, right-wing populists seek to maintain the perception of migration as dangerous, which can only be met by the nationalisation of immigration regimes.

An example of this can be seen in the continued extensions of internal border controls in the Schengen area. Right-wing conservative politicians originally started spreading the message that border controls were necessary to preserve the Schengen area. Once reinstated, however, these border controls did little to alleviate the original concerns or messaging. Rather, the original actors continued voicing concerns around national sovereignty and started advocating ever more for far-reaching measures.⁶¹ This shows how mimicking right-wing discourses can sometimes have unintended or harmful effects.⁶²

Second, research on the topic has found that in adopting such strategies, **mainstream parties run the risk of strengthening support for right-wing populist parties as more attention is placed on topics from which such parties easily benefit**. By raising the salience of migration in this way, right-wing ideas can break their own (online) echo chambers and reach a much greater audience.⁶³ The radical right parties might also be able to ‘unlock’ certain segments of the electorate that had not considered voting for them before through such dynamics.⁶⁴ More specifically, the crisis narrative of migration can fuel anti-immigration sentiment among parts of the population that are predisposed to seeing migration more critically. In this way, certain aspects of migration that can be perceived as threats to conservative values (e.g. security, tradition) have activated pre-existing anti-migration sentiments.⁶⁵ In short, the crisis narrative has created a context in which right-wing voices and ideas are normalised and then amplified far further than their actual organic reach, which translates, in certain cases, into increased electoral successes for radical right-wing parties.⁶⁶

Such developments have been observed at the EU level during the last few years.⁶⁷ For instance, and by drawing on a perceived necessity of tackling the migration ‘crisis’ ahead of the European Parliament elections in 2019, right-wing populist parties enjoyed unprecedented levels of attention (even if their total gains fell short of expectations).⁶⁸ Similar dynamics can be observed on the national level, too. Parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), Lega in Italy or the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria have successfully built election campaigns on right-wing and restrictive migration narratives and thereby expanded their base of supporters.

By framing migration as a ‘threat’ to public order and security, it becomes easier to legitimise more restrictive migration policies.

Third, in imitating right-wing populists, the crisis narrative can **lead to self-harm as it also enables the perpetuation of populist discourses that seek to blame the EU**. Research has shown that populist communication makes strategic use of citizens’ emotions, such as anger and fear. As such, it seeks to blame the EU for not doing enough to address popular concerns.⁶⁹ In the context of the migration ‘crisis’, it has been – and still is – easy for politicians like former Italian Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini or the AfD to level accusations that the EU is not doing enough ‘to stop the invasion’.⁷⁰

Fourth, the crisis narrative **limits what can be communicated, in that it overstates the centrality of certain emergency measures**.⁷¹ This can lead to significant attention gaps in other policy areas. As the ‘crisis’ was communicated as an emergency, it was difficult to put a bigger focus on integration measures, for instance. Rather, communications on policies in the context of border management are a much more natural fit to the frame of the ‘crisis’ and hence easier to communicate through such discursive approaches. In addition, one could argue that migration in itself has become a ‘crisis issue’, which undermines the ability of the EU and member states to communicate on and legislate migration constructively. This is highly problematic as migration will continue to be a major feature of European countries and become necessary to uphold the standard of living in ageing societies.

Fifth, and in a general sense, through the sustained use of the crisis narrative, **a shift to control-oriented policy measures has taken place following so-called ‘securitisation’ dynamics**. As this particular framing also presents migration as a ‘threat’ to public order and security, it can lead to an exclusionary perception of migrants as a danger to internal, cultural and welfare

security that should be closely controlled.⁷² In this way, and by creating an emergency context, it becomes easier to legitimise more restrictive migration policies.⁷³ In turn, and as observed in several cases, these policies can also give rise to humanitarian crises that are still ongoing today.

A frequently mentioned example in this respect is the link between the policy measures adopted and the humanitarian crisis taking place in the CMR, which, between 2015 and 2019, has cost approximately 12,000 lives.⁷⁴ Research has shown that policy changes implemented during the ‘crisis’ – such as the scaling down of Operation Sophia’s mandate, the crackdown on search and rescue (SAR) NGOs or cooperation with the LCG – have increased the relative mortality rate on the CMR.⁷⁵ In this context, strengthening the LCG’s capacities to control Libyan waters and borders was one element of the EU and the member states’ responses to controlling migration crossings in the Mediterranean. The EU-Turkey statement is another point in case. It was originally devised to end migration from Turkey to the EU. It has been argued, however, that it also exacerbated the conditions of the hotspots on the Greek islands and created a situation in which the human rights of migrants as well as the principle of non-refoulement have been put at risk.⁷⁶

As a sixth and final impact, the crisis narrative has also **created a context conducive to more ad hoc policymaking**. More specifically, in this context short-term emergency measures took priority over more sustainable and future-oriented policymaking. The unstructured approach to relocating refugees who disembarked in Italy or Malta during the spring and summer of 2019 provide an example. In a politically tense climate, member states could not agree on a codified disembarkation mechanism, leading to several SAR boats being stranded at sea for weeks.⁷⁷ The informal nature of these arrangements, however, as argued by Carrera and Cortinovis, raise serious concerns regarding their fundamental rights compliance.⁷⁸ In addition, such ad hoc policy instruments have also been unhelpful in furthering EU integration in the area of justice and home affairs. It can be argued that they have exacerbated gaps which already exist in EU asylum and migration policies concerning crises, such as a fundamental lack of solidarity between member states.⁷⁹

In summary, this section of the Discussion Paper has presented arguments to support the claim that **the crisis narrative employed by the Commission has not been appropriate to the situation at hand**. In addition, it has given rise to serious political issues, from a surge of right-wing populist discourses to a shift towards more control-oriented policies. Going forward, it is important that the Commission fully abandons the crisis narrative in the migration context and develops more accurate and coherent communication strategies.

3. Towards a new migration narrative for the European Commission

Developing a blueprint for the Commission's communication on migration is – admittedly – not an easy task. It can be especially difficult as unforeseeable events also need to be spontaneously communicated, and with much consideration. This imposes a certain need for adaptability and flexibility. Nevertheless, in what follows, some recommendations are provided that can support a more constructive and forward-looking approach to communicating about migration.⁸⁰ The recommendations are complemented with several examples to give an idea of how they can be applied in practice (see Table 1 at the end of this section).

3.1 DEVELOP A CODIFIED COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

As emerged from several interviews conducted for this project, the Juncker Commission did not work on the basis of a codified communication strategy in the context of migration.⁸¹ Instead, it developed standpoints and 'lines to take' by consecutively building on previous communication materials.⁸² The new Commission should, as a matter of priority, **develop a proactive communication strategy on migration**, which anticipates specific policies or events that are to be communicated at a certain point in time as much as possible. Naturally, such a strategy must be flexible enough to react and adequately cover unplanned or unpredictable developments. Nonetheless, certain communicative points can and should be agreed on in advance in order to create more strategic messages and long-term visions. This will also help the Commission to be more **proactive in setting the communicative scene on migration**.

3.2 CONSIDER SALIENCE ISSUES

As a starting point, and before discussing specific recommendations, some attention should be given to the concept of 'salience', namely the degree of concern or importance awarded to a certain issue.⁸³ Policymakers should take note of how a high salience of migration is linked with a rising politicisation of the issue along ideological lines.⁸⁴ This is to say that the higher migration climbs on the political agenda, the more it becomes an attractive issue for right-wing populists to capitalise on. This, in turn, explains their motivation behind maintaining high levels of alarm regarding migration and hence sustaining a high issue salience.

An awareness of these dynamics, however, should not prevent mainstream political actors from communicating on migration. Several communication officials have indeed expressed weariness of

communicating too frequently about migration.⁸⁵ As most people working on the topic in the EU context would testify, the salience of migration fostered a politically charged environment further where reaching agreements has been exceedingly difficult.⁸⁶ It is therefore important to be aware of the impact that frequent communication and a connected rise of issue salience can have on political decision-making and the influence of anti-immigration forces in particular, as documented above.⁸⁷

It is important to be aware of the impact that frequent communication can have on the influence of anti-immigration forces.

Nevertheless, not communicating about the issues at hand is not a viable option either. Quite the opposite, not communicating (enough) about issues that are clearly of concern to a majority of European citizens would almost certainly backfire, as right-wing populist forces have no qualms about misusing migration as a communicative tool to advance their fear-mongering tactics. In this context, Commissioner Avramopoulos acknowledged in early 2019 that "alarmist discourses are poisoning our citizens on a daily basis."⁸⁸ Not communicating about migration sufficiently would also raise questions as to the Commission's priority management. This is especially important, as the Standard Eurobarometer of autumn 2018 has found that citizens consistently rank the migration issue as more important at the EU rather than national level.⁸⁹ Researchers have deduced from this that citizens see migration as a political priority for the EU rather than an issue facing them daily.⁹⁰ **While there is a case to be made for not 'over-communicating' an issue and therefore raising alarm levels again, it is the tone and contextualisation rather than frequency of communications about migration that need to be adjusted.** The following points consider this argument more closely.

3.3 EMPLOY MORE DIVERSE FRAMES

It is, first and foremost, important to **abandon narratives that present refugees and migrants – and particularly their numbers – as an issue that must be addressed in the framework of 'crisis management'**. As analysed above, communicating about migration through a security frame has contributed to the crisis narrative,

and can lead to increased support for anti-immigration parties and harm mainstream political actors. To adequately pre-empt such dynamics, the Commission should diversify the frames it uses when communicating about migration. There certainly are issues connected to migration that merit a security focus. However, it is important to underline that not all migration movements present security issues. There are other ways of framing migration at the EU level that would not play into the hands nor rhetoric of right-wing actors. More generally, greater diversification of frames, adaptable according to the different topics discussed, would lead to a more balanced discussion on migration.

A greater diversification of frames would lead to a more balanced discussion on migration.

To give an example, communication on integration policy lends itself easily to different framing exercises, keeping in mind that this is a policy area on which the EU has limited competences. In what follows, three possible frames are presented.

- **Applying a security frame could help present integration policies as crucial for creating more harmonious societies and thus prevent conflict between different groups.** This frame could also be appropriate when communicating about deradicalisation programmes for third-country nationals or EU citizens fighting in conflicts abroad.
- **Employing an economic frame would enable a narrative about integration in terms of the added economic benefits of migration.**⁹¹ As research has shown, European societies are ageing and labour markets need immigration to uphold welfare systems.⁹² Citizens are becoming increasingly more open to accepting migration as a solution to these issues.⁹³ An economic frame could also portray migrants as active and valuable participants to society (e.g. by contributing to social welfare systems with their taxes, opening up new markets that are linked to their countries of origin).
- **Communicating about integration through a humanitarian values frame can give more weight to ethical considerations and the value basis of migrant integration.** As such, integration measures can be communicated as enabling migrants to become fully-fledged and democratically responsible members of society. A similar values-based approach has been applied before to the area of forced migration and concerning member states' legal responsibility to grant asylum to those in need of protection.⁹⁴ Applying such a frame for integration contexts may also help raise the audience's empathy levels. It could be appropriate, for

instance, when communicating funding opportunities for grassroots organisations or local communities that work to integrate refugees or migrants.

In sum, different frames serve different communication needs, and the appropriateness of each frame must be considered according to the policies they describe and the narratives they should convey. It is in any event important to consider the wide variety of frames that can be used and not limit communication to security-oriented frames alone.

3.4 RELY ON STORYTELLING

Communication about migration should find a healthier balance between various communication aspects, such as numbers and personal stories. This is something which many communication officials are already aware of.⁹⁵ More specifically, a better balance needs to be found between, on the one hand, considering numerical or operational facts and, on the other, presenting stories about migration policies.⁹⁶ As studies have shown, personal testimonies and storytelling are very effective in raising an audience's empathy levels.⁹⁷ These tools have therefore become staples in strategic business communications as well as NGO advocacy efforts to create compelling narratives.⁹⁸ A good example of applying these techniques to the Union's institutional context can be found in the Commission's EU Protects campaign which explains how different institutions in the EU collaborate on issues impacting safety, health, environment and societies in Europe.⁹⁹ It does so by featuring "local heroes", thereby giving a human face to what are in fact complex processes.

Personal testimonies and storytelling are very effective in raising an audience's empathy levels.

As a less ideal example, EU communications on return policies are, instead, a field where communications often took on a rather technical tone. In these communications, the Commission speaks, for instance, of "return decisions", "return procedures", "return management systems" and the aim of "increas[ing] effective returns".¹⁰⁰ This might help convey the technicalities of return operations. However, it also presents the return of migrants in a very abstract way. To break down the complexity of these policies and reach a larger audience, **a greater focus could be put on the stories of returned migrants.** Communications could be made more tangible, for instance, by narrating the stories of individual migrants experiencing these policies first-hand and including basic information about their background and journeys, as is appropriate. This would give more space to answer why these migrants are being returned

and how this works in practice. It would also provide an opportunity to show how a person's fundamental rights are being observed during a return process, potentially opening up a space to talk about the human rights of the concerned migrants.

Evidence-based communications should be the foundation for all EU communications on migration.

In addition, **the Commission should abandon the exclusive focus on numbers** for two main reasons. First, numbers and statistics are more difficult to convey to an audience directly and almost always require an explanation to frame them within their context. This complicates direct communication.¹⁰¹ Second, an overreliance on numbers all too easily leads to reverting to a 'crisis' (or 'end of crisis') mode. As such, it also constitutes a mode of communication that can be recycled by third actors, particularly right-wing populists, to create a platform for alarming and harmful agendas. Emotional storytelling, on the other hand, can lend itself to more personal stories of migrants or communities that exceed a focus on numbers yet avoid turning into sob stories. In this way, storytelling does not necessarily have to renounce factual details. On the contrary, evidence-based communications should be the foundation for all EU communications on migration. Especially in times of 'fake news' and 'alternative information' spread by populist right-wing forces, it is of utmost importance to maintain a reliable and transparent presentation of facts that can be checked and verified independently.

3.5 CONSIDER DIFFERENT CONTEXTS AND TARGET AUDIENCE GROUPS

There is extensive research on audience segmentation and how values and opinions should be taken into account when formulating communication messages.¹⁰² On this basis, the Commission should **gain a better understanding of the diverse audience groups in the EU and shape its communications in order to target them**. In what follows, a number of insights from this literature are discussed and linked to communication strategies.

As a baseline, it is clear that communication officials should **know their audience** before formulating a message. Research on public opinion has found that attitudes on migration in the EU have remained relatively stable and neutral, and have even improved in some countries after 2015.¹⁰³ There was only a modest increase in anti-immigration sentiment, which was mostly among citizens in Central Europe.¹⁰⁴ Studies have also found that individuals' values are crucial in explaining attitudes towards migration, even more so than the effects of

sociodemographic characteristics.¹⁰⁵ For instance, attachment to conservative values can go hand in hand with lower support for immigration, while those with more universalistic values are usually more supportive of immigration.¹⁰⁶ It is therefore important to take note of research on audiences at the national level and to differentiate between society groups that are specific to EU member states.¹⁰⁷

In this regard, much attention has been paid to the **'movable middle'** which, on a spectrum of values, represents those members of society that do not fully subscribe to either liberal or conservative values. Studies have shown that this segment of the population is likely to see the positive social and economic impact of migration. This has led researchers to conclude that there is a far larger proportion of the society that is leaning more towards the values typically associated with societies that are open towards migration. This then means that this 'middle' section of society may not be as neutral as previously assumed.¹⁰⁸ In general, it seems evident that a more liberal and open narrative on migration would resonate with larger proportions of the EU population than is often assumed.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, constructive and forward-looking communications on migration are likely to fall on fertile ground, more so than is often assumed in the current political climate. Communication actors should therefore **not shy away from defending the positive value of migration for societies** when tailoring messages for this 'middle' section of the audience.

A more liberal and open narrative on migration would resonate with larger proportions of the EU population than is often assumed.

At the same time, other audience groups in society should not be left unaddressed. Rather, communication needs to be shaped according to a certain group's opinion. While passionate liberals may never agree with a policy on border control, nor staunch conservatives support expanding legal pathways, both groups nevertheless need to be included in communication efforts on why such policies are needed. The content of communication output should be consistent and coherent throughout. However, the delivery of communication material could still be tailored by taking into account the values of the targeted audience group.¹¹⁰

Strategic communications must take these differences into account to be effective. While this might be difficult when drafting EU-wide communications, the Commission could nevertheless explore avenues for increased communication efforts at the national or local levels. The Commission has collaborated with its representations in member states as well as with third countries to

communicate about issues that are relevant for a certain audience.¹¹¹ Another possible avenue to explore would be **to draw more on the expertise of local PR companies**. These are often much better placed to truly understand the context in which they are operating and how to target a specific audience. To go a step further, there is also a case to be made in **communicating with EU citizens directly**, in addition to communicating at the government level and with journalists by way of highly tailored briefings. This gives the Commission more control in steering the message, instead of being overly reliant on national media to translate complex issues to respective audiences. This would likely necessitate additional resources. Still, in times of increasingly inward-looking national politics, a more relatable communication style would go a long way to create a more direct, and sorely needed, connection with citizens.¹¹²

3.6 DELIVER MESSAGES IN A MORE RELATABLE AND DIGESTIBLE MANNER

In addition to targeting specific audience groups as specified above, **a greater focus should be put on making the style and tone of communications more relatable and clarifying the impact of said policy on individuals' lives**. This is the case, for instance, in respect of the continuation of controls at the EU's internal borders, which were set up as a policy response to the 'uncontrolled' movement of migrants between EU member states in 2015-16 and which persist until now. They do, however, disproportionately affect individuals frequently crossing the borders for work reasons, for instance, and therefore have a personal and negative impact on a considerable number of EU citizens.

The Commission should also strive to present messages on migration policies in a more **digestible manner**. Similar to the above point about understanding audiences better, this would help establish more direct and closer connections to those audiences. To this end, it should explore **whether actors closer to national audiences** – instead of what some perceive as EU 'elites' – **could be empowered to deliver the message**. Several UN agencies, for instance, have successfully employed so-called goodwill ambassadors from various fields of public life to give more prominence and publicity to UN initiatives. The Commission might also consider a similar initiative.

Moreover, various EU institutions have already recognised that their staff, if given the necessary leeway and briefed accordingly, can act as effective ambassadors towards their national audiences and present a more approachable image of the EU.¹¹³ This goes for both real-life encounters, such as presenting at public events and for their online presence via various social media channels. The Commission already works with internal technical tools by which officials share examples of social media engagement that can be used as a blueprint for other colleagues.¹¹⁴ Such initiatives should be strengthened and expanded to foster the spread of best practices. In other words, a consistent and centralised strategy can be delivered through decentralised communication channels.

Furthermore, and as drawn from several interviews, there is an awareness that **translating all communications into the EU's 24 official languages is imperative**.¹¹⁵ In the field of migration policies, this is not yet done comprehensively but should be implemented by all institutions and agencies working on the topic to reach national audiences more easily. Again, employing additional resources in this context could generate worthwhile benefits in strengthening citizen's access to EU communication output.

3.7 LINK MIGRATION ISSUES TO THEIR RESPECTIVE CONTEXTS

As a final recommendation, it is also advisable to link communication on migration to other relevant policy areas, both horizontally and vertically. Some economic or social policies, for instance, can be impacted by migration policies and vice versa. Equally, there is a need to refer to national measures on other migration issues at the member state level – as long as it is relevant and in line with the Commission's mandate. This would also help to alleviate certain concerns about migration that are very much **linked to their respective context** and would find a more accurate answer in other policy areas. For instance, a perceived scarcity of jobs on the national level is often wrongfully attributed to an increase in the number of migrants, and thus best be tackled through labour market reforms rather than more restrictive migration policies. Communications on migration need to take this into account so that core concerns are disentangled and migration is no longer be used as a scapegoat for other issues.

Table 1: Summarised recommendations for communicating about migration

Do	Don't
Consider salience issues	Be silent on migration issues
Employ differentiated framing	Only use a security frame
Rely on storytelling	Focus on numbers
Target audience groups' different values	Rely on one-size-fits-all communication
Make messages more relatable and relevant for local contexts	Use a removed style or focus on the EU level only
Make communications more easily digestible	Employ bureaucratic language
Link migration (issues) to the respective context	See migration as a stand-alone issue

Conclusions

The arrival numbers of refugees and migrants to the EU over the past five years have been unprecedented. In communicating about this phenomenon, the Commission applied the narrative of the migration crisis strategically, developing it from a rather unstructured usage of several terms to establishing the ‘crisis’ as a stand-alone and historically unprecedented phenomenon. The Commission has communicated about the ‘crisis’ based on two factors: (i) numbers and (ii) the uncontrolled nature of arrivals. The continuous repetition and reinforcement of this narrative based on these factors portray a specific story of the nature of the ‘crisis’. In 2019, the declared end of the ‘crisis’ along these interpretative lines actually reinforced this narrative further.

On that basis, this Discussion Paper has argued that the Commission’s use of the crisis narrative has not been accurate, neither in its description of past phenomena nor addressing of citizens’ concerns. Instead, it framed the number and nature of arrivals as a security issue. This legitimised the development of increasingly restrictive migration policies that focused on border management and cooperation with third countries in order to manage migration and tackle the ‘crisis’.

This communicative strategy, however, has backfired. It was inappropriate given the far larger numbers of refugees hosted in third countries and ongoing humanitarian crises that, in comparison, did not receive the same attention. It also ignored the fact that a significant part of the ‘crisis’ is related to policy problems and mismanagement rather than the sheer number of arrivals.

More problematic, however, are the political dynamics connected to this crisis narrative. The narrative has helped create a context in which right-wing populist forces have been able to accuse mainstream actors of not doing enough to tackle the ‘crisis’. Not only are these actors able to exploit the situation for their own political gain, but they have also managed an overall shift to the right: in both discourses on migration and legislation introduced as a response to populist, and often

xenophobic, rhetoric. In this way, right-wing voices and ideas are increasingly reaching the mainstream.

To counter these dynamics and create a more progressive and forward-looking narrative on migration, this Paper proposes a number of considerations that could be useful for the new Commission’s strategic communication on migration:

- ▶ Taking account of salience issues without letting these considerations prevent communication output.
- ▶ Employing differentiated framing and abandoning the security frame as the primary choice for constructing a narrative on migration. Rather, a more diverse choice of frames that also speaks to, for instance, economic concerns or values-based issues would be more adequate.
- ▶ Giving more room to stories in addition to technical details as a useful way of making communications more accessible to audiences.
- ▶ Tailoring communications by taking into account the national context and different audience groups’ values and beliefs.
- ▶ Making the manner in which migration is communicated more relatable and easily digestible for audiences.
- ▶ Linking migration issues to their respective context, for instance by showcasing links with other policy areas, instead of seeing them as stand-alone concerns.

The topic of migration will continue to present a communication challenge that can only be addressed through clear and strategic communications. This Paper has sought to put forward several recommendations that can be used by the Commission towards this end. Taken together, they aim to move Commission communications on migration beyond the ‘crisis’.

Annex: List of EU communications

2015

European Commission (2015a), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2015) 240 final, Brussels.

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2015), [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. Addressing the Refugee Crisis in Europe: The Role of EU External Action](#), JOIN(2015) 40 final, Brussels.

European Commission (2015c), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. Managing the refugee crisis: State of Play of the Implementation of the Priority Actions under the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2015) 510 final, Brussels.

2016

European Commission (2016a), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the State of Play of Implementation of the Priority Actions under the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2016) 85 final, Brussels.

European Commission (2016b), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council and the European Investment Bank on establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2016) 385 final, Strasbourg.

2017

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2017), [Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. Migration on the Central Mediterranean route: Managing flows, saving lives](#), JOIN(2017) 4 final, Brussels.

European Commission (2017a), [Action plan on measures to support Italy, reduce pressure along the Central Mediterranean route and increase solidarity](#), SEC(2017) 339, Brussels.

European Commission (2017b), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Delivery of the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2017) 558 final, Brussels.

European Commission (2017d), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: Commission contribution to the EU Leaders' thematic debate on a way forward on the external and the internal dimension of migration policy](#), COM(2017) 820 final, Brussels.

2018

European Commission (2018a), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2019) 481 final, Brussels.

European Commission (2018b), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council – Managing migration in all its aspects: progress under the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2018) 798 final, Brussels.

2019

European Commission (2019b), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2019) 126 final, Brussels.

European Commission (2019a), [Facts Matter: Debunking Myths About Migration](#), Brussels.

European Commission (2019d), [Europe in May 2019. Preparing for a more united, stronger and more democratic Union in an increasingly uncertain world](#), Brussels.

- ¹ European Commission (2019a), [Facts Matter: Debunking Myths About Migration](#), Brussels, p.5.
- ² The paper explicitly focuses on an analysis of the Commission's framing of the migration crisis narrative, while acknowledging that other political institutions, particularly the European Council and the European Parliament, have been equally active in shaping the narrative on migration at the EU level. Naturally, EU agencies such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, the European Asylum Support Office and the Fundamental Rights Agency also play an important role in this respect.
- ³ See Annex for full list of all 14 European Commission communications. All of the material used in this section is accessible via the Commission's website, under the umbrella of the European Agenda on Migration. See *European Commission*, "European Agenda on Migration – Legislative documents" (accessed 03 December 2019).
- ⁴ Communications are only one among several types of European Commission communication outputs, such as press material and factsheets. The latter are often complementary to communications, and are geared more towards journalists and the informed public. The analytical focus of this Discussion Paper is on Communications, which allow the Commission to communicate about a specific topic or issue comprehensively. Accordingly, they also allow for a more in-depth analysis of the Commission's full communicative position.
- ⁵ Cf. Carnahan, Dustin; Qi Hao and Xiaodi Yan (2019), "Framing Methodology: A Critical Review", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*. Graef, Josefin (2019), "Responding to Right-Wing Populist Stories of Migration: A pragmatic approach", Berlin: Dahrendorf Forum.
- ⁶ Cf. Miskimmon, Alistair; Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2017), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
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- ²¹ European Commission (2016b), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council and the European Investment Bank on establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2016) 385 final, Strasbourg, p.2.
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- ²⁸ Ferreira, Susana (2018), "From Narratives to Perceptions in the Securitisation of the Migratory Crisis in Europe" in Marianna Karakoulaki, Laura Southgate and Jakob Steiner (eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Migration in the Twenty-First Century*, Bristol: E-International Relations, Chapter 4, p.64.
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